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ABSTRACT

When a variety of groups became concerned with a perceived deficiency in public education in the 1970's, critical attention was successively focused on student accountability, the school curriculum, and teachers. This digest briefly reports on teacher competency testing. The 1980 Gallup Poll showed that 85% of citizens polled said teachers should be required to pass a state examination in the subjects they teach. By the end of 1981, 18 states had planned or implemented some form of testing for teacher certification. The two major teacher organizations, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and the National Education Association (NEA) have taken opposing sides on the issue, with the AFT firmly supporting fair and valid tests and the NEA opposed to the use of exit examinations. Most of the arguments involved in the debate surround the following issues: (1) use of standardized tests to measure teacher competency; (2) duplication of effort between teacher competency tests and test requirements of the diploma granting colleges; and (3) use of written examinations for licensure in other professions. Other issues in teacher competency testing include: (1) establishment of cutting scores, below which applicants would not be granted certification; (2) use of norm-referenced versus criterion-referenced tests; (3) use of locally validated standardized tests versus nationally normed tests; and (4) legal and policy issues. (LMO)

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TEACHER COMPETENCY TESTING

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ERIC UPDATE

TEACHER COMPETENCY TESTING

TEACHER COMPETENCY TESTING: AN HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

The practice of testing teachers for certification or employment can be traced back to the oral and written examinations administered to prospective teachers by local school boards in the early nineteenth century. Teacher applicants who possessed basic proficiency in reading, writing, and arithmetic, as determined by the county superintendent, were certified to teach public school children in the county where the applicant took the test. Later on in the nineteenth century and continuing through the mid-twentieth century, as state boards of education assumed responsibility for certification of teachers, satisfactory completion of a prescribed curriculum that usually included proficiency in professional techniques and specific subject-matter knowledge, as well as competency in basic skills, became necessary to secure a teaching credential. Eventually graduation from an approved teacher-training program and completion of a specified number of subject hours were required for certification, and until the late 1970s, these two criteria were the mainstays of teacher certification requirements. The apparent lack of controversy over such certification procedures suggests that the public was satisfied that qualified applicants were entering the teaching profession, while unqualified individuals had been successfully excluded from teaching.

THE DEMAND FOR ACCOUNTABILITY

By the 1970s, however, a variety of interest groups, educators, and parents had become concerned with a perceived deficiency in public education. "This dissatisfaction, voiced and also fueled by the national media, included educators' frustration with a ten-year decline in SAT scores, parents' reports of functionally illiterate high school graduates, and business leaders' complaints about the lack of even minimally qualified entrants into the work force" (Rubinstein et al., 1982, p. 10). Critical attention was successively focused on student accountability (in the form of minimum competency tests), the school curriculum (in the form of emphasis on the basics), and finally on teachers themselves. This attention culminated in a call for teacher competency testing, evidenced by the 1980 annual Gallup Poll of the public's attitudes toward the public schools, in which 85% of those citizens polled said teachers should be required to pass a state examination in the subjects they teach (Hathaway, 1980, p.10).

States have responded to this public demand for teacher accountability in three important ways, all of which center on some aspect of certification. Between 1970 and 1975, every state in the union considered modifying teacher certification practices to incorporate the principles of competency-based education, and twenty-six states implemented a system of approving teacher education programs (Rubinstein et al., 1982, p. 4), thus requiring that all teacher applicants graduate from approved schools. And, finally, as of the end of 1981, 18 states had planned or implemented some form of testing for teacher certification (Vlaanderen, 1982). These states required testing of education majors and/or teaching certification applicants only; no states require incumbent teachers to take a test to retain their teaching certificates. It has been speculated that the efforts of teachers' unions have thus far successfully protected currently employed teachers from competency testing (Rubinstein et al., 1982). Nine of the eighteen states require prospective education majors to pass some form of competency tests prior to admission to the professional sequence. It is probable that these requirements stem from the the widely circulated statistics that indicate that teacher education students rank below other college students on average SAT scores (Shanker and Ward, 1982). Consequently, some state teacher education programs have responded to these statistics by raising their professional standards for entrance into the professional programs.

THE DEBATE OVER TEACHER COMPETENCY TESTING

Changes in teacher certification procedures as dramatic as those implemented or considered in over one-third of the states in the union are bound to generate controversy among those most closely involved with education. Such has been the case with the teacher competency movement. The two major teacher organizations, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and the National Education Association (NEA) have taken opposing sides of the issue, with the AFT firmly supportive of fair and valid teacher competency tests (Shanker and Ward, 1982, p.8) and the NEA opposed to the use of exit examinations "in the basic skills, general education, and the teaching speciality" (Hodgekins and McKenna, 1982, p10). Educators, teachers, legislators and the public have all taken sides in this debate, and although there are numerous

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questions involved, most of the arguments surround the following issues:

1) The use of standardized tests to measure teacher competence. Proponents of teacher competency testing argue that written examinations will ensure that those entering the profession have attained at least a minimum competence in basic skills, subject areas, and pedagogy as presented in academic training programs. Opponents argue that such academically-based tests cannot measure other important aspects of teacher performance such as instruction and classroom management skills.

2) Duplication of effort between teacher competency tests and test requirements of the diploma granting college. Proponents of testing argue that tests would ensure that general standards have been met, since colleges have different programs and standards; opponents argue that accountability for assessing the results of instruction should be left to the departments involved in that instruction.

3) Use of written examinations for licensure in other professions. Proponents argue that since we require other professionals to pass licensure examinations prior to entry into their fields, it is not unreasonable to require the same of teachers. Opponents argue (a) that a high score on a state licensure exam does not ensure a competent professional, and (b) that some other professional testing programs are controlled by practitioners, not lay boards.

Other issues in teacher competency testing are more technical and involve the establishment of cutting scores below which applicants would not be granted certification; the use of norm-referenced versus criterion-referenced tests; use of locally validated standardized tests versus nationally normed tests; and numerous policy issues, such as those related to legal challenges to certification testing, teacher tenure and dismissal, requirements for continued certification, reciprocal certification agreements between states, and legislative involvement in determining teacher education curricula.

CONTINUATION OF THE DEBATE

It is clear that the debate over teacher competency testing will continue well into the 1980s. Publication in the spring of 1983 of the National Commission on Excellence in Education's A Nation At Risk, a work highly critical of public education today, is but one indication of the scrutiny that public school teachers continue to receive. Testing for certification is one solution to the public's demand for accountability that state policymakers have adopted in recent years, and it is likely that the testing movement will grow. It remains to be seen, however, if teacher competency testing will result in the improvements to public education projected by its proponents.

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For a comprehensive bibliography on this topic, please refer to the ERIC/TM Highlight, "Competency Testing of Teachers" (1982), compiled by Barbara M. Wildemuth.

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